

Report on Church Culture Retreat

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On Saturday, October 28th, 2023, Council sponsored a church culture retreat to help Grace Lutheran do some discernment work in preparation for calling a new pastor. This retreat explored the personalities and gifts of the people who make up our church, the personality and culture of our church body as a whole, and the needs and personality of the community outside of our walls. The group in attendance was generous and chose to be honest and vulnerable with each other about who they are, what they see as strengths and weaknesses in our church, and what dream they have for the future of Grace Church.

After processing the day with the Transition Team, here are four key takeaways:

1. We have a church full of people who love to serve and help but prefer not to be in charge or set vision. Our people are loyal and hardworking, and we value deep relationships, stability, and harmony. With these strengths come an aversion to change, conflict, and authoritarian/top-down leadership. We want to work together, we want everyone to get along and feel valued, and we don't want the boat rocked with a bunch of change.
2. We know this neighborhood and we share many of the passions that our neighbors share. The room came to life as we talked about the culture of Northeast and their love of art, the environment, local food and breweries, the old and new immigrant communities that share their culture, dogs as family members, mutual aid and nonprofit work, and so much more. We talked about getting out of our four walls and taking part in what others are doing; volunteering with community partners, bringing a group to local restaurants and bars, sponsoring a trivia night, going to art shows, investing in the schools and parks, and working in the community gardens. One of the big truths we agreed upon was that meeting people in the community and building relationships counts as church even if the people we invest in don't come on Sundays. There was a lot of excitement around the possibility of getting out in the community and not always having to be the hosts of everything; it is way less work to join what someone else is doing than to recreate the wheel in your own space. It was fun to see the spark of creativity and joy around meeting our neighbors. This is a church that loves people.
3. In this conversation about who we are, we uncovered some fears and grief that reinforce our aversion to change and conflict. There seems to be grief around the loss of people that has birthed a fear narrative that says, "If we try something new or change things, people will leave." This fear stems from the unhealed hurt of people leaving when the three churches became one, people leaving as we became Reconciling in Christ, and people leaving in 2022—Emmy, the first interim pastor, our intern, and many of the Queer Grace congregation members.

This unhealed hurt has left us distrustful of leadership and may lead to us being a difficult congregation for a new pastor to motivate. We are people who love deeply and accept people as family, so when people leave it is especially painful for us because it hits at the things we value most: loyalty, stability, and relationship.

Our last two pastors led us in big changes that centered around passion projects of theirs: Craig's desire to run a community center and Emmy's passion for the LGBT community and for becoming a safe and healing space for those traumatized by church. Our legacy members have invested in following the vision cast by these pastors, including challenging deeply held internal beliefs and norms in order to love the people that were at the heart of these projects—but those works were championed and run by the pastors, not the congregation so when the pastors left, the work died without them. The compounded losses of pastor and people have left a scar in the hearts of many in this church. That unresolved grief is leading to lack of motivation, fear, anxiety, and a lack of clarity of what we should do next. Much like a depressed person, we don't want to move but we also don't want to lay around and die. We need to deal with the grief in order to be in a healthy place to accept and grow with a new pastor.

4. There is a desire for a collaborative leader as our next pastor, someone who takes time to build relationships with the congregation and invites us into ministry opportunities that maximize our gifts and passions, and partner us with the neighbors outside our walls. We need a pastor who will empower and include us in a relational, neighbor-based vision that we have ownership of as a congregation and that outlives future ministry leadership changes.

Going forward, the Transition Team is interested in working on the grief and healing that is necessary for us to be healthy and ready for a new pastor. It was discussed that we would do some listening and some vision casting in small groups around the church, inviting our different culture groups to voice some of their fears, hurts, and frustrations in smaller, safe places as Ben, Brenna and the Transition Team listen and facilitate those conversations. Then the next step will be to bring our groups together and talk through some of the things we heard in our listening sessions. We will work to reframe unhealthy narratives and behavior patterns, talk through and resolve lingering grievances and hurts, and celebrate and acknowledge our three 'parent' churches' history in an effort to build appreciation of our differences and healing of unspoken divisions.

As we look towards filling out the "dating profile" (ministry site profile) for the synod that will help us choose a new pastor, we first want to work on ourselves so that we are healthy enough to start a new relationship. Then we want to look at who we want to be in the future. We'd like to create space to dream about future ministries and community partnerships. We'd like to work on cultivating our gifts and strategically empowering our members to serve in roles that they are passionate about, where each person can utilize their specific strengths to the fullest and find purpose and fulfillment in the work they were created to do. As we discern who we are and who we are called to be for ourselves and our neighbors, it should become increasingly clear what kind of leader we will need to call as our next pastor.